Toward a Theory of Comic Book Communication

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Overview

In an October 15, 1986, appearance on "Late Night with David Letterman," Harvey Pekar, writer of the autobiographical comic book *American Splendor*, expressed the potential of the comic book medium in clear, simple terms: "It's words and pictures. You can do anything you want with words and pictures" (Witek 154) Comic books are a unique and powerful form of communication. Perhaps long-time comic book writer Jim Shooter is a bit carried away by his enthusiasm when he claims that "What we've got is the most portable, limitless, intense, personal, focused, intimate, compelling, wonderful visual medium in creation" (6). However, it is true that comic books tell stories and involve readers in ways that no other art form-not plays, novels, nor film-can duplicate. As Roger Sabin points out in *Adult Comics*, "[...] they are a language, with their own grammar, syntax, and punctuation. They are not some hybrid form halfway between 'literature' and 'art' (whatever those words might mean), but a medium in their own right" (9).

A consideration of graphic novels and comic books as rhetoric requires a renewed emphasis on the intentions and strategies of the author(s). Rhetoric, as a critical perspective, has never become fully poststructuralist or postmodern. The author as rhetor is not dead. The rhetor is, in fact, the vital creative force that calls the rhetorical universe into being. This is not to deny that the audience contributes to the meaning (communication is generally recognized to be a transaction), or even reshapes the discursive universe to serve their own needs (as in Bormann's symbolic convergence). However, the author still very much matters to a rhetorician. Intention and strategy still matter to a rhetorician.

The rhetorical act of creating a comic book can be divided into encapsulation, layout, and composition. A number of existing theories and critical vocabularies (most notably those of film *mise en scene*) have been applied to explicate the composition of graphic storytelling. There is a wealth of readily available practical advice from graphic artists concerning effective layout. Veteran comics creator Will Eisner offers comics specific advice in *Comics and Sequential Art* and in *Graphic Storytelling*. However, encapsulation, the framing of the essential moments of a story in "telling" images, has received little attention from practitioners or theorists. Certainly, there is no formal theory of encapsulation.

Methodology

The first phase of the research employed an inductive, panel-by-panel examination of ten graphic novel or comic book stories in order to discover the rhetorical dimensions, devices and strategies of encapsulation. The examination purposely excluded elements of composition and layout. The sample chosen for examination was: *Boy's Ranch* # 4 (1951), *Lieutenant Blueberry: The Iron Horse* (1967), *A Contract With God* (1978), *Detectives, Inc.* (1980), *The Death of*

Captain Marvel (1982), *Batman: The Killing Joke* (1988), *Epicurus the Sage* (1989), *The Ballad of Dr. Richardson* (1994), *The New Adventures of Abraham Lincoln* (1998) and *Family Matter* (1998).

The process was conceived as a strict panel-by-panel coding, but soon evolved when it became evident that pages could be written about each panel. Since the research was an inductive process of discovery, the uses of encapsulation devices and strategies were not quantified. No generalizations were made about what types of encapsulation are characteristic of different genres. The results of this phase were a broad and sketchy outline of the formal categories of encapsulation.

In the second phase of the research the formal categories were applied to a stratified convenience sample of 50 comic book and graphic novel stories, representing each era and various genres of the medium, in order to determine if the theory actually reflects praxis. In this phase of the research, encapsulation was considered in the broader communication context of how messages are encoded in the unique "language" of the comic book medium and then decoded by the readers.

Encoding

On the broadest level of comic book communication there is the story or narrative: what happens. However, a comic book does not visually, or even verbally, present each moment of action in the narrative. Certain moments of prime action from the narrative are selected by the writer and/or artist and encapsulated in a frame (a unit of comic book communication that is called a panel, irrespective of whether or not there are actual panel borders). The rhetorical act of creating a comic book consists of encapsulation, layout, and composition.

Encoding: Encapsulation

The Process of Encapsulation

The process of encapsulating certain moments involves creative decisions that are central to comic book communication. Like any creative process, encapsulation is an individualized process. For most mainstream comics, the process involves a number of individuals. In this research the process of encapsulation is addressed in the abstract, without regard to which creator (writer, penciller, etc.) made a particular encapsulation choice.

The process begins with an idea or ideas. The idea might be an incident, a character, or just an image. Whether the idea slowly blossoms in the mind of an individual creator or rapidly grows through the brainstorming of collaborators, the idea is eventually structured into a story. Whatever the working method (full script, thumbnails, working from panel to panel, etc.), the story must breakdown into sequences, scenes, pages, and panels.

Levels of Encapsulation

While the term encapsulation is generally used to refer to the act of creating panels

(framing moments of action), it is also true that there is an encapsulation, a deciding what to show at the levels of scene, sequence and even story. Telling a story always entails choices about where to begin and where to end. The major building blocks of the dramatic structure of the story are sequences. A sequence is comprised of related and usually consecutive scenes. However, sequences can be fragmented by cutting back and forth between them, and still be a comprehensible unit of the story. Scenes are imprecise units of the story that usually, but not necessarily, have unity of time and space and portray a continuous action. Scenes are unified by a central concern, be it a location, an incident, or stream of thought.

The page is, by necessity of the form, an organizing principle and a unit of encapsulation. The same is also true of any two facing pages of story. Will Eisner, in *Comics and Sequential Art*, comments on the importance of considering the page as a unit:

Pages are the constant in comic book narration. They have to be dealt with immediately after the story is solidified. Because the groupings of action and other events do not necessarily break up evenly, some pages must contain more individual scenes than others. Keep in mind that when the reader turns the page a pause occurs. This permits a change of time, shift of scene, an opportunity to control the reader's focus. Here one deals with retention as well as attention. The page as well as the panel must therefore be addressed as a unit of containment although it too is merely a part of the whole comprised by the story itself. (63)

A page can contain a random slice of the story (e.g. the end of one scene and the beginning of the other), or the page might be used more purposively as a sort of meta-panel. To qualify as a meta-panel, a page must possess some unity or even dramatic structure of its own. A page can be composed with unity of action (what is done) and/or theme (what it means). A full-page drawing is not a meta-panel; it is merely a panel (a mega-panel).

Nature and Types of Panels

The panel itself is most central and vital level of encapsulation. Examining hundreds of panels led to a confrontation with an unexpected question: what is a panel? A discrete drawing surrounded by a white space (a "gutter") is not always a panel. It could be just a portion of the actual panel, or it could contain a number of panels. The unit of comic book communication known as a panel occupies a finite space and encapsulates a finite, if sometimes indeterminate, span of time. Yet, because artists such as Chris Ware and art spiegelman push the form and play with our expectations, it is not always easy to recognize or define a panel.

Are there genres of panels with specialized functions? There is no significant pattern of specialized functions for the first panels of pages. For instance, establishing panels, those that introduce the reader to the location of a new scene, seem just as likely to appear anywhere else on the page as they do in the first panel. However, last panels of pages more often serve specialized functions. The most common functions are the cliffhanger panel, that impels the reader to go the next page to find out how a conflict is resolved, and the end of scene panel. Other discernable genres that occur in the last panel are the dramatic revelation panel, the startling development panel, the clue panel, the climax panel (in which the conflict is resolved), the denouement panel (which is usually the last panel of the last page), the address-the-audience

panel (often the last panel of the last page), and the posed panel (in which a dramatic picture of the hero is presented outside the context of the narrative).

What to Show

This decision of what moments of the story to present to the reader is the central concern of encapsulation. Bob Harvey writes, "The selection of what is to be pictured is greatly influenced by the quantity of story material (how much exposition is required, how much action, what must be depicted in order to prepare for subsequent events, and so on) and by the available space" (178). There is a constant dynamic between what is shown and what could be shown.

One aspect of this dynamic is the syntagmatic choice, the process of selecting which panels to present from the possible sequence of story images that could occur along the horizontal axis. While images not selected might well be imagined by the reader performing the process of closure, as Bob Harvey points out "[...] what is chosen to be pictured necessarily acquires more dramatic emphasis than what is left out" (178). Because the syntagmatic axis involves not only selection, but sequencing and combining, it will be discussed in more detail under layout.

At each panel and at each image in a panel, the syntagmatic intersects with the vertical axis of the **paradigmatic choice**, or the chosen image and all the images that could have made sense or communicated nearly the same meaning at the same given point in the panel. A paradigmatic connotation results from comparing, not necessarily consciously, the image shown with "its unrealized companions in the paradigm" (Monaco 131). That is to say, "the meaning of what was chosen is determined by the meaning of what was not," because the rhetor privileges the chosen sign over alternative signs in an attempt to shape a preferred meaning of the text (Fiske 62). The point of intersection between the syntagmatic and the paradigmatic is the point of rhetorical intention and strategy.

The Reductive Nature of Encapsulation

Comics are reductive in creation and additive in reading. That is, the creators reduce the story to moments on a page by encapsulation, and readers expand the isolated moments into a story by closure. And within the basic unit of encapsulation, the panel, there is the paradigmatic choice of how much to show of each of the elements within the encapsulated moment. The most prevalent reductive process in comics is synecdoche, using a part to represent the whole or vice versa. For example, in the majority of panels only a portion of a character's body is drawn. Even more often, this is true for objects (cars, buildings, etc.). It is not even possible to show all of an action in the comics medium. If this reduction is done with thought and skill, readers understand the whole from the parts presented. Metonymy, the use of an associated detail to represent the whole, can be utilized in two ways. The most common metonymy in comics is the depiction of part of the physical manifestation of an emotion. In his study of the language of film Pudovkin noted, "There is a law in psychology that says if an emotion gives birth to a certain movement, by imitation of this movement the corresponding emotion can be called forth" (193). In comics as well the gestures, postures and facial expressions associated with an emotion can be used to represent that emotion. A detail can also represent a whole through a less direct,

more indexical relationship based on commonplaces or conventions. For example, tattered clothes indicate someone has been in a fight. In the first appearance of Superman there is an extreme example. In a series of five panels, man in a shirt and tie is thrown against the walls by Superman and then breaks a knife on Superman's "tough skin." By the fifth panel, in which he has fainted, the sleeves are completely torn from his shirt. In another convention of the superhero battle, the burst drawn at the conjunction of fist and jaw indicates the force of the blow.

Symbols are another means of economy of expression in comics. Symbols can manifest as a sequence metaphor, two juxtaposed images that act as tenor and vehicle, or a common lore metaphor, based on repeated associations of unrelated signifier and signified that have become conventionalized. Common lore metaphors require some pre-knowledge on the part of the reader, and are dependent on context. "For example, a picture of the moon iconically represents the moon, but it could also symbolize danger and lurking terror if it appears in the comic book *The Tomb of Dracula*, or romance if it appears in an issue of *True Life Romance*" (Duncan 94).

Since everything in comics, including character, is reduced to surface the use of **stereotypes**, a recognizable generalization of a type, is prevalent. The generalizations can be based on physique, hair, posture, clothing, and other artifacts, and especially on facial features. "By employing characters who resemble animals, the graphic storyteller capitalizes on a residue of human primordial experience to personify actors quickly" (Eisner *Graphic* 20).

Encapsulation of Actions / Motions

A panel can present a single action or multiple actions. The degree and nature of motion in a panel can be classified as movement or stasis, broad or subtle, fast or slow.   Motion can be rendered, by speed lines, repeated figures, etc, or implied, by a figure or object occupying a different space than it occupied in the previous panel. Implied motion is set up by encapsulation choices, but realized by closure.

Encapsulation of Time

The manner in which time is encapsulated controls the duration of attention and affects the pacing of the story. The amount of time encapsulated in a panel can be an instant, a moment, or even a sequence of events (what might be called a sequence panel).

A "reading" of time is based on panel size and panel content. While there are many exceptions and misuses, it is often true that the larger the panel, the longer the time span depicted in the panel. When constructing panel content, a creator has to be aware that a reader senses the amount of time elapsed based on his or her own experience of how long it takes to perform the action depicted.

Interdependence of Verbal and Visual

Perhaps the most significant and elusive element of comic book encapsulation is the unique blend of words and pictures that must occur for the medium to communicate

successfully.

An important consideration of how the verbal and visual are encapsulated is the correspondence of the words to the action/scene. Balloons or captions can be synchronous or asynchronous with the picture. There is also the consideration of how the words correspond to the duration of the action. When there are many speech balloons with a single image "[...] the picture is appropriate to only some of the conversation — and the remainder of the speeches lose dramatic force because they lack the narrative reinforcement of suitable accompanying visuals" (Harvey 188). Comics scholars Reinhold Reitberger and Wolfgang Fuchs offer a general rule for the combination of words and images in comic books: "The most important rule for any comic is that the text must be contained within the picture" (25). This means not only that the verbal message must fit within the confines of a space defined by the visual message (that is, either a hard or a soft panel), but that what is written must "fit" with what is shown. A proper fit depends upon the emphasis and support given to each component. The means by which the verbal and visual work together will be discussed further in the section on composition.

Encoding: Layout

Operating at a broader level of narrative breakdown, layout concerns the relationship of a single encapsulated panel to the succession of panels, to the totality of the page and to the totality of the story. Because it operates beyond the single panel, layout can be described by syntagms.

A syntagm is the structure by which signs combine and interact to form a meaningful unit of communication. There are three syntagmatic structures involved in layout.

The spatial syntagm deals with the size and positioning of panels. The sequence syntagm deals with the relationships between the narrative units of panel, scene, and sequence. For example, is it important to look at how many panels are used to encapsulate a scene or sequence? Should the number of panels used indicate the centrality of a scene to the story? The juxtaposition syntagm concerns a panel's relationship with the panels that proceed it and the panels that follow it. These syntagms operate as levels of "grammar" that make comic book communication decipherable and meaningful to the reader.

Encoding: Composition

The third act of encoding the message is the composing of individual panels. Film borrowed from theatre the concept of *mise en scene*, "putting in the scene." Most of the *mise en scene* elements presented on stage or screen can be depicted in a comic book panel: setting and decor, color, "lighting," distance, angle, and movement.

Distance

In comic book composition is distance is the reader's *perceived* distance from the scene depicted. Just as with film there are five basic distances that the comic book artist can employ: extreme long shot, long shot, medium shot, close-up, and extreme close-up.

One of the primary functions of the extreme long shot is to establish a context or sense of place at the beginning of a story. Long shots can also be used at the beginning of a story to establish the setting. Repeated use of long shots in a story (especially when they are not motivated by a change of setting) tend to stress setting over character. The medium shot creates a balance between character and setting. A specific form of medium shot is the two shot. The two shot frames two characters who are interacting so that their reactions to one another can be viewed simultaneously. The close-up emphasizes character over setting. First, this is true because very little of the setting is visible in a close-up shot. Second, it is true because a character's affect displays (emotions indicated by facial expressions) are more in evidence in the close-up. The extreme close-up is also used for emphasis. In the extreme close-up, an entire panel is devoted to some detail (e.g. a ring, a scar, a signature, etc.) important to the plot.

Angle

Another aspect of comic book composition analogous to film camera work is angle. The five basic angles of film shots-extreme high angle, high angle, eye level, low angle, and extreme low angle-can be used to describe the perspective presented in any given comic book panel.

The extreme high angle, or bird's-eye view, can be used to present a subjective experience, suggest relationships, or make the reader an omniscient viewer. The high-angle shot can also be used to make the reader feel detached from the action, or to make something or someone seem small and weak. Panels that present eye-level perspectives tend to create identification with the characters and a sense of involvement in the action. The low-angle panel once again puts the reader in an unequal relationship with the objects or persons depicted. Low-angle shots are often used to make someone or something seem powerful or menacing. The extreme low-angle, or worm's-eye, view is the most infrequently used perspective in film or comic books. When it is used, it can make whatever is shown seem very threatening, or it can make the reader feel omniscient by seeing the action from a vantage point usually unavailable to humans.

Movement

There are two types of "movement" depicted in comic books: primary movement (of people or objects in the frame) and secondary movement (of the frame itself). But, obviously, neither people nor frame actually move. So, what is meant by "movement" in comic books? In live-action film and animation, a series of still pictures are shown in rapid succession in order to simulate movement. On the static comic book page there is no way to simulate movement. The most that can be done is to use techniques that convey a sense of movement, and rely upon the reader's imagination to perceive those techniques as actual movement. There are five basic techniques for communicating primary movement in a comic book.

The most common technique is simply the posture of the characters. The next most common technique is the use of lines to indicate movement. Thin lines drawn behind an object or character indicate the direction and speed of movement. It is generally the case that the more blurred the image the faster the speed depicted. The third method of communicating movement is drawing a partial outline of an object or figure in its previous position or positions. The fourth

method is an extension of the outline. The artist makes multiple full drawings of the character in action with only slight differences in the character's position each time so that (in the manner of animation) a virtually continuous action can be shown in a single panel. The final technique for conveying primary movement is a combination of multiple drawings and framing. At times movement within the frame may actually occur over a number of panels. A meta-panel composed of a number of smaller panels can establish a stationary setting, while in each of the smaller panels the same character or object can be shown at a different point in the setting, thus giving a sense of the figure moving within the frame of the meta-panel. Even without there being an established background, a series of panels can operate as a meta-panel if they portray a continuous action and give a sense of the movement of that action.

Primary movement in comic books has four potential variables that can contribute to syntactical meaning: direction, speed, kinetic quality, and symbolism. While it is possible for all four variables to be present in a given movement, only direction is a constant in comic-book movement. These variables carry no definite meaning. However, there have been some generalizations made about the meaning of primary movement as used in film. Stromgren and Norden provide an overview of some of the possible effects of primary movement:

The direction, speed, kinetic quality, and symbolism of film actors and objects in motion provide important dramatic variables, though perhaps film theorists have made too much of their apparent psychological qualities. Downward movement is usually associated with depression, deflation, weakness, or death, while upward movement suggests exhilaration, authority, and life-giving force. Likewise, movement toward the camera is usually associated with aggression and start of exploration, while movement away is associated with recession and completion of exploration. These psychological properties may be helpful guidelines to dance choreographers and film directors if they do not approach them as prescriptive and unalterable rules. (48)

Horizontal movements also have psychological properties. Since viewers are conditioned by years of reading to find left-to-right movements "more natural and restful than right-to-left," filmmakers will often have "objects and actors move from left to right during positive, harmonious scenes and from right to left to set up tension and disharmony" (Stromgren and Norden 49). Of course, the artist does not always intend, nor does the direction of movement always imply, any particular meaning.

Secondary movement, or movement of the frame, can be used to direct reader attention, control the mood and tempo, suggest relationships, and make the reader feel involved in the action. The six basic types of frame movement are panning, tilting, rolling, tracking, dollying, and craning. An artist working in the static medium of comic books cannot copy these movements, but by varying the perspective in successive panels the artist can achieve some of the effects of secondary movement.

Visualized Sound

In comic books, any sound that is to be introduced into the story has to be visual, and is, therefore, an element of composition. Voice, sound effects, and music are uniquely represented in comic books. This representation, of course, lacks the realism and effectiveness found in an

auditory medium. Yet, when the reader makes the requisite effort, these elements can be a great deal more expressive in comic books than they are when presented in non-illustrated prose.

Comic book dialogue and narration is generally presented in neat, clearly printed lettering. Such lettering achieves its purpose of being easy to read, but it does little to suggest the paralanguage elements of human speech. Less tidy, but more expressive lettering comes closer to representing the true nature of the spoken word. Aspects of paralanguage can be visually suggested by varying the size, thickness, and shape of both words and their containers.

Because of the "zap," "pow," and "zowie" of the Batman television series, onomatopoeic sound effects are probably one of the best known features of the comic book. While such sound effects add the element of "sound" to the action, they also clutter the artwork and often (probably due in good measure to the Batman television show) seem puerile.

Of the three types of sound, music is the one least effectively represented in comic books. The words of a song, and even the musical score, can be placed in a comic book panel, but for those who are not familiar with the song or do not read music, it is merely text. The limitations of the form make it virtually impossible to score a comic book in the manner of a film. However, through the visual shorthand of musical notes, a reader willing to make the effort and meet the artist halfway can be made to hear the sound of music in his or her head. The pictures give clues as to the type of music and the readers fill in sounds from their own experience.

Verbal-Visual Blend

One of the most intriguing elements of comic book composition is the combination of the verbal (linear and successive) with the visual (lateral and all-at-once):   "Rather than two 'stable' texts (words and pictures) juxtaposed, the comic book is a form of self-inflicted 'double-writing,' collapsing traditional strategies for reading word and picture texts" (Schmitt 158). Although the reader has virtually total control of the scanning process, the most sophisticated practitioners of this "double-writing" can influence the reader by skillful placement of text and dialogue. The sequence of balloons should indicate the sequence of events. Schmitt observes that "in most modern comic books [...] the speech balloons are broken into small parts and dispersed asymmetrically throughout the framed image; 'chopping it up'" (158). Maurice Horn notes that "Expression in the comics is the result of this interaction between word and picture, it is the product and not the sum of its component parts" (10).

Semiologist Roland Barthes approaches the interaction between words and images by identifying two functions that the linguistic message serves in relation to the image: anchoring and relaying (28). According to Barthes, anchoring is "the most frequent function of the linguistic message" (30). Anchoring explains the visual message. Barthes believes this anchoring function derives from the need to make visual signs more manageable. Comic book art, especially when it is rendered in an exaggerated cartoon style and appears in small panels, is often ambiguous enough that the anchoring function of a verbal component is necessary to clearly communicate the intended message.

When words serve the relaying function, they support the visual message. Barthes explains how this support functions in comics:

Here language (generally a fragment of dialogue) and image are in complementary relation; the words are then fragments of a more general syntagm, as are the images, and the message's unity occurs on a higher level: that of the story, the anecdote, the diegesis. (30)

The relaying function operates in the majority of comic-book panels, where only with the combination of words and images does the reader receive the full message of who, what, and why.

The blend of words and pictures in comic books should not be thought of as a balance between the two components. Based upon such factors as genre, message, and target audience, one component is usually emphasized over the other. Traditionally, it has been the image that has received the greatest emphasis. Reitberger and Fuchs make the generalization, "It is bad-that is it lacks effect-if it is too wordy where a picture would be more striking" (230). However, Will Eisner does not believe that dominance of the image is appropriate for all subject matter:

... in order to write seriously or deal with a subject like man's relationship with God, you can't have razzle-dazzle pages of two mutants trashing each other. You must be able to let your artwork be subordinated sometimes to the story, which is the way I work. I start with the idea and let the artwork deal with the idea, rather than the idea dealing with the artwork. (66)

The second part of the "fit" between word and picture is the support each component gives to the other. Without the two components working together to provide both substance and attitude, the message is not effectively communicated. It is the blend of pictures and printed words that make comic books a unique form of communication. It is the proper emphasis and support of these two components that is the basis of effective comic book communication.

Scott McCloud, in *Understanding Comics*, provides the following categories of word and picture combination: Word Specific combinations where pictures illustrate, but don't significantly add to a largely complete text; Picture Specific combinations where words do little more than add a soundtrack to a visually told sequence; Duo-Specific panels in which both words and pictures send essentially the same message; Additive combinations where words amplify or elaborate on an image or vice versa; Parallel combinations where words and pictures seem to follow very different courses without intersecting; a Montage where words are treated as integral parts of the picture; and Interdependent combinations where words and pictures go hand-in-hand to convey an idea that neither could convey alone (153-55).

Style

The expressive potential of lines mean that the pencil lines with which a picture is drawn and the brush strokes with which it is inked can create affective and/or cognitive reactions to an image. The concepts of the emotional power of line and the synaesthetic nature of comic books raise some interesting questions about the relationship between style and closure. Is closure facilitated by art that is "cartoonish" or art that is realistic? Does an overly designed panel or

page make the reader too aware of the mechanisms of storytelling and detract from the closure that should create the story?

It should be remembered that for all the compositional variables covered in this section, the meanings discussed are not meant to be prescriptive or exhaustive. Just as words can constantly be used in new combinations and, over time, take on new meanings, so it is with the syntax of visual communication.

Decoding

In any act of communication, the meaning (the decoded message) ultimately resides with the receivers. The elements of the decoded message parallel those of the encoded message, but in reverse order. The receiver performs closure within and between the encapsulated moments in order to create a completed whole out of fragments. Perhaps one of the most important standards for the critical evaluation of a comic book is whether or not the encapsulation choices of the writer and artist produced successful closure.

Decoding: Closure

Reading in the twenty-first century often involves more than the mere understanding of words. As Tom Wolf has pointed out, "[...] reading of words is but a subset of a much more general human activity which includes symbol decoding, information integration, and organization [...]" (427). The very concept of literacy has been revolutionized and broadened. Visual literacy, the ability to understand pictorial information, became one of the basic skills required for communication in the latter half of the twentieth century.

The existence of the comic book has done more than just help undermine the primacy of the printed word. Comic books break down, or at least blur, the boundaries between word texts and picture texts. Reading comic books requires a different type of literacy because on the comic book page the drawn word and the drawn picture are both images to be read as a single integrated text. Of course, comic books can vary in the degree to which they successfully integrate these two texts. Some theorists propose using the degree of interdependence or interanimation of word and picture as the primary aesthetic standard for evaluating comic books.

This "dance" between the partners of the medium affects the manner of reading and the meaning derived from the reading. As Ronald Schmitt points out, "[...] signification and stable meaning is continually deferred as the eye, instead of scanning left to right in even, linear patterns, jumps between words and pictures, spiraling, zig-zagging, and often interrupting the entire process to re-scan the information in a new way" (158). McCloud's categories of word and picture combination (detailed in the encapsulation section) are useful for describing the ways in which the two components of the comic-book text perform their "dance."

McCloud also provides categories of transitions between panels: Moment-to-Moment; Action-to-Action; Subject-to-Subject; Scene-to-Scene; Aspect-to-Aspect; and Non-Sequitur. These transitions can also be thought of describing how readers perform closure or "read" the juxtaposition syntagm of layout. The meaning produced by closure is more than the sum of the

parts, but it is not always clear when the meaning comes from the combination of parts and when it comes from the clash of parts. This alchemy of juxtaposed images was at the heart of Eisentein and Pudovkin's classic debate about whether meaning in a film comes from the combination of shots [A + B = C] or the clash of shots [A X B = C]. It should be noted, however, that while Eisenstein and Pudovkin were concerned with images juxtaposed in time, comic books juxtapose images in space.

Decoding: Affective and Cognitive Responses

The receiver has *cognitive reactions* (knowing) and *affective reactions* (feeling) to the signs that are communicated by the compositional elements within panels. The generalization might be made that affective reactions are primarily to composition and cognitive reactions are primarily to encapsulation, particularly layout. However, the two levels of interpretation are inextricably interwoven and constantly inform one another during the interpretive process. At one level, the story is understood cognitively by perceiving structure, but the idea derived from the story comes from both perceiving the subtext and feeling the meaning.

Decoding: Idea/Story

At the highest level of decoded meaning, the receiver creates a continuous *story* out of discrete panels. However, this involves more than simply understanding **what happens**, but also an understanding of **what it means**, the subtext. Every element of the communication process depicted in this model flows into and affects the ultimate meaning that each receiver derives from the comic book communication act.

Christian Metz's famous statement about motion pictures, "A film is difficult to explain because it is easy to understand," also applies to comic books. Any formalist theory must recognize that at some point the exactness of categories breaks down and that the taxonomy is but a map that can never truly represent the territory. Just as words can constantly be used in new combinations and, over time, take on new meanings, so it is with the syntax of visual communication.

A wholly accurate theoretical construct of any art form is impossible to achieve but necessary to attempt. A "close reading" of a comic book or graphic novel is difficult, if not impossible, without a vocabulary to name the elements and strategies of an art form. It is difficult to perceive that for which we have no name. Thus, a vocabulary makes the reading clearer by heightening our awareness of the constituent elements. Yet, a vocabulary also has the potential to limit our reading because we tend to perceive **only** that for which we have a name.

Truly rich, nuanced criticism of comic books must move beyond the cookie-cutter approach of applying formalist categories. Yet, more sophisticated research must build on the foundation and employ the vocabulary of formal theory. Identifying the elements of encapsulation and closure and the relationships between those elements is a necessary first step to understanding the comic book as a unique rhetorical act.

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Biographical Sketch

Randy Duncan, Professor of Communication and former chair of the Communication and Theatre Arts Department, received his M.A. and Ph.D. in rhetoric from Louisiana State University. His research specialization has been adapting traditional rhetorical theory to visual/verbal communication. He is co-founder of the Comic Arts Conference, and is writing a college level comics appreciation textbook.